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**AN ANALYSIS UPON FEMINISM IN THE INDIAN  
CONTEXT: WOMEN IN INDIAN FICTION IN  
ENGLISH**

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# An Analysis upon Feminism in the Indian Context: Women in Indian Fiction in English

Shiv Kumar Kataria

Research Scholar, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

**Abstract – “Feminism” ordinarily means “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities”. It is also an organised activity in support of women’s rights and interests. It is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women. A feminist pleads or supports the rights and equality of women.**

**Feminism in India aims at defining, establishing and defending equal political and social rights as well as equal opportunities for Indian women. Feminism in Indian Fiction in English is, as commonly conceived, is a very sublime and over-the-top concept handled subtly under restricted circumstances. India women writers have often raised variety of themes in a style that usually poetry and novels are capable of offering. Indian writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural inequality that constrained women’s liberty and perpetrated institutional seclusion of women. Kamla Das explores the women’s plight suffering in their day to day life. Shashi Deshpande deals with remorseful condition of women. Bapsi Sidhwa highlights socio-economic condition of Parsi women. R.K. Narayan is concerned about house-wives of middle class families. Mulk Raj Anand satirizes the socio-religious hypocrisy prevalent in various walks of society. Anita Desai primarily deals with human conditions of suffering women. Kamla Markandeya opts the theme of east-west encounters. Salman Rushdie is worried about sexual abuse of children. Shobha De presents a concept of new women who totally ridicule the traditional way of life. So, Indian writers in English are keenly aware of women related issues and they plead for gender equality in their own way.**

**The word feminism refers to the advocacy of women’s right seeking to remove restrictions that discriminate against women. It relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. Feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present. The word feminist refers to the person who advocates or practices feminism and it takes political position. Female is the matter of biology and feminine is a set of culturally defined characteristics. Indian feminists have also fought against cultural issues within the patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and practice of widow immolation known as sati. Unlike the western feminist movements, India’s movement was initiated by men and then joined by women.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The word “Feminism” ordinarily means “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities”. It is also an organised activity in support of women’s rights and interests. It is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women. The endeavour includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education or employments also. A feminist pleads or supports the rights and equality of women. Feminism in India aims at defining, establishing and defending equal political and social rights as well as equal opportunities for Indian women. It is pursuit for ensuring the women’s right within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world,

feminists in India seek gender equality, such as the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against socio-cultural issues within India’s patriarchal society, such as inheritance law and the practice of widow immolation known as ‘Sati’.

Feminism in Indian English Fictions, as commonly conceived, is a very sublime and over the-top concept handled subtly under restricted circumstance. It is not at all a new concept and over the years many writers and novelists have successfully raised the issue through their creative writings. Indian women novelists and other writers, composing their thoughts in English range from array of writers like Toru Duff to Kamla Das and from

Sarojani Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy to Shashi Deshpande. These female Indian Writers have opted the astonishing variety of themes in a style that usually poetry and novels are capable of offering. Indian Women Writers have often raised their voice against social and cultural inequality that constrained women's liberty and perpetrated institutional seclusion of women.

Male novelists, like R.K. Narayan, have also highlighted the sufferings of Indian housewives in the course of his presentation of fictional imagination. Women writers explore into the life of house-wives and condemn their exploitation in order to make sense of the fast changing pace of the new world. Kamla Das explores into the women's plight in India and the world around them. Others like, Shashi Deshpande, sketches characters who blame their own complacency for their remorseful condition and stoic suffering. Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the socio-economic conditions of women of Parsi community. Anita Desai's novels are an exploration into the psychic world of women who face various oddities and eccentricities in their day to day life.

The feminist perspective came into prominence ever since the prominent writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shobha De began to opt the women's issues as their themes and focused on the cause of Indian women. The stand taken by them is the same as taken by the feminists who oppose the customs norms and traditions of the society which tends to place women in a position inferior to that of man-socially, politically, physically and economically. These novelists have taken up themes of rebellion against the existing social set up by its women characters. Women are no longer like a 'puppet' portrayed in a traditional way where husbands are the lords and women are identified as weak, meek and submissive creature. These writers have created protagonists who feel and realize that they also have their own role to play in family and society like their male counterpart. They too have their own likes and dislikes. They want to raise voice to be heard by the society. So, a class of new women has come up in order to play a positive role on the world to promote the women's cause and perspective.

Nayantara Sahgal's women are liberal and unconventional capable of denying injustice and inequality against them. Saroj in *Strom in Chandigarh* refuses to meek and sober feminine behavior like other traditional women. She wishes to establish herself as an individual with an identity of her own for her husband, Inder, in order to realize him that she is not mere a wife. The psychology of an ordinary women longing love and understanding is very convincingly presented in the novel. Her husband keeps on questioning all about her pre-marital affair with a boy. Inder wants Saroj to be a devoted and pious traditional wife but he himself wants to carry on his indulgence of extra-marital affair with Maya who is already a married women claiming to be male privilege.

In another Sahgal's novel *The Day in Shadow*, the women characters are seen revolting against male supremacy. The heroine Simrit represents the plight of Indian woman who fights in their own way to get rid of unhappy marriages. When she get divorce from her husband, a woman in India faces a lot of difficulties as the society look upon her in a prejudicial manner. She has to face a lot of problems in almost all the spheres of life- moral, social and economic.

In Sahgal's *Rice Like Us*, the heroine, Shonali, occupy a high and respectable position as an I.A.S. Officer yet she finds it difficult to avoid marriage. The 'inevitability' of marriage in our conservative society is questioned in the novel and present tradition of getting married being ultimate goal of every women, is ironically ridiculed by the novelist. Even if she is boss in the office, the male officials tend to disobey her orders due to their ego problem and superiority complex.

The female protagonists of Nayantara Sahgal are the new women who exert for freedom from all social and moral obligations which fetter their freedom. They fight against male dominance and demand right of equality. They dare to show that they have in them the courage of rebellion and they do not accept the conventional impulse for submission.

The women of Sahgal are "strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, toward goodness, toward a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity". The feminist standpoint is manifest in the novels of Anita Desai even though the revolting women are not so bold. The female protagonist are apparently unwilling to accept the male dominance and the female subjugating tendency of Indian society. The leading female characters in *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the city*, Maya and Monisha rebel against their insensitive and uncaring husbands who never care to understand the feelings of their wives. Maya's rebellious woman is the product of frustration caused by the non-fulfillment of wife's aspirations. She longs to satisfy her physical and emotional needs but she could not get that from her husband. As an educated and modern woman, Maya finds it much difficult to tolerate the Gautama's indifference towards her. At its climax, in a fit of extreme anger and frustration, she kills him and also kills herself.

In *Voices in the city*, Desai presents the pathetic life of Monisha, an educated young woman married in conservative middle class joint family. She strongly dislikes the monotony of traditional house-wives whose thinkings are confined to such things like saris, jewellery, babies etc. Her husband, Jiban, never reciprocates her love and overlooks her pains.

She resorts to suicide as the only means to get rid of pain and sorrow. Thus, women of Anita Desai revolt against the traditional concept of submissive women like Sati-Savitri who silently accept their fate as

suppressed individuals. Shobha De is totally different from other Indian Women Writers. She has ushered as new trend in her feminist stands and outright reject the male hegemony. She strikes through her novels the unsympathetic and inhuman attitude of callousness and indifference of men towards women denying rights of equality.

The women characters of Shobha De take all their own decisions and appear to be the master of their own lives. These new women are not weak and soft like traditional women. These women are set in the rich and sophisticated society of Mumbai. They are independent, ambitious, confident and assertive. In ***Sisters***, the protagonist Mallika Hiralal takes over the charge of Hiralal Industries confidently after her father's demise and runs the business in her own terms. She does not need any advice of anybody, not even of Ramankaka who was a close confident of her father who now offers his active support in looking after the management of her business. But she respectfully and firmly brushes aside his offer. Later, Mallika marries Binny Malhotra to save her father's failing business rather than for her love and liking.

Shoba De ridicules the conventional thinking where once married, a woman is expected to be loyal to her husband, while for the husband it is his pleasure whether to honour the marriage or break it or play with it. A man can keep a number of mistresses while a woman has to sulk silently at home with all her sufferings and humiliations. Shobha De's women launch an assault against the conservative thinkings and the conservative tradition of moral values which often bind them from rebelling. The women of Shobha De have a number of boyfriends as much as their husbands have girlfriends. In ***Socialite Evenings***, the protagonist, Karuna, shares a physical relationship with her husband's friend, Krish, and instead of keeping it a secret she is open about it; "I love this friend of yours, and I want to be with him in vehicle".

In order to reach to the proper definition of feminism, we should learn first to understand the co-concepts like 'patriarchy', 'masculinity', 'subaltern', 'others' and the history of woman's development. After reading all this, we could succeed to wipe up many prejudices, which we are carrying with us from a long time in the concern of feminism. We should learn to make difference between freedom and promiscuity. If we want women's freedom, we should know that at least from what we do expect it. Behaving like male is not freedom, but at the same time, we should know the differences between man and woman. We should know our weaknesses and power. We should know it better that to oppose male is not the way to reach to the goal. Patriarchy is nothing but a social system. Therefore, if we want women liberation we should go through the history of man. We could easily get the answers of being a patriarchal one. If we go through the proper definition of feminism, we come to see that

the purpose of feminism is beneficial to both men and women. Men also want liberation from the burden of masculinity. Therefore, if we succeed to apply feminism in society it works great and for that, we need to concentrate on different grounds like gender, cast, race, religion and disabilities.

## FEMINISM IN INDIAN CONTEXT

Traditionally, right from the ancient days, India was a male-dominated culture. Indian women were covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in life. They were inanimate objects, who followed five paces behind their men, they had to be gentle, patient, gracious, and for generations together. Bengali women were hidden behind the bailed windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring verses from "The Bhagavad-Gita and The Ramayana" in the dim light of sooty lamps'. The Indian woman today is no longer a Damayanti, she is a Draupadi or a damian or a Nora or a candid Joan of Arc. Social reformers. Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and political revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru lent her a new dimension, gave her a new direction.

The term feminism in India refers to a set of movements intending to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. Like their feminist counterparts in the world, feminists in India seek gender equality. This can be the right to work for equal wages, to have access to health and education as well as political rights. It is worth mentioning that feminists in India have also fought against cultural issues within the patriarchal society of India, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as Sati.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati (Gangoli, 2007). The second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement, and independent women's organizations began to emerge. Finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women in the work force and right to political parity.

Kumari Jayawardena in her pioneer work on feminist movements in Asia, in the late 19th and early 20th century, defines feminism as "embracing movements of equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system".



In this definition, she assets these movement as the formulation and consolidation of national identities which mobilized anti-imperialist movements during the independence struggle, and the remaking of pre-capitalist religion and feudal structures in attempts to 'modernize' the third world societies. The rich history of women's movements in India has been well documented by scholars.

## ROLE OF FEMINISM

In India, a woman has always been inferior in the society. India is a multi-lingual country. Villages cover much of the land of the nation. The condition of rural Indian woman is very bad. The landless poor women spend about four to five hours every day in the forest in order to search fuel or fodder. In villages, women use 70% of their energy and eat only one third of the calories as compared to those consumed by their husband. One fourth of the twelve million girls born in India every year die before the age of 15. In the past, women were not allowed to learn, read and write.

Talking about Maharashtra, the first girl school was started by Mahatma Phule in 1848 at Pune and since then only girls have been going to schools. In due course, they proved that they were capable in talent and equally adventurous as boys. The education in English was far out of the reach of Indian women. We seemed to have had a wrong impact of Savitri and Sita on Indian women in Maharashtra instead of following the brave women like Rani Lakshmibai and Jijamata. We seemed to have had an acceptance of the image of goddess, which had been given to them by patriarchal society. After getting freedom, we Indian people started to think about women's problems. Actually, the arrival of British provided an impetus in the upliftment of women. The British brought education and it changed the attitude of few thinkers like Agarkar, Maharshi Karve and Ranade in Maharashtra. Karve had started to write about women's problems and their situation in society and thus opened the door of freedom for women. In those days, women were facing social discrimination. They were victims of child marriage and child widow. The immature widow had to face many bad traditions like cutting hairs and making herself ugly in order to prevent her from the lust of cruel men. In that case, if she became pregnant, the only option remained for her to commit suicide. (Mangala Athalekar, 2004) Indian woman has to prove herself chronically a good daughter, a faithful wife, a devoted mother and at last a caring grandmother. In her married life, she has to defend herself against her in-laws and save herself from mental, physical and emotional annoyance. She prefers to be humble than to be an arrogant woman. She seems always devoted and kind and so regarded as a goddess. In Ramayana 'Sita', had to jump into the fire in order to prove her purity, but unfortunately, no one had doubted 'Rama', though he too had spent fourteen years in the same forest! Since a long time, the tradition of blaming women for various reasons continued. The Indian woman is still playing the role of 'Sita' and is still trying

to prove her purity and innocence. Sita, Mira, Savitri, Draupadi are the names of those women whose story tells us the characteristics of the Indian women. A woman who devotes her whole life to prove her love for the husband found only in India. The male partners never suffer the same order.

## WOMEN IN INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

Language has a remarkable capacity to change or chain persons. Literature uses language as its medium to depict reality after passing it through the crucible of human imagination and vision. Language carries with it the stereotypes and values of a culture and the child while learning the language adopts these images and values naturally as he or she grows up. As NgugiwaThiong'O, a Kenyan writer states, "Language carries culture and culture carries particularly through orature and literature the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and others."

Right since the formation of human society, language has been shaped and ordered as per the male ideology, the condition reflecting the patriarchal set up when the social structure rested strictly and quintessentially on the division of labour and a clear cut separation of the public and private spheres between men and women. This order has continued many centuries later even till today despite the rationalisation and the awareness brought about through the advancement of science and technology. Unfortunately, the healthy and requisite division of labour in the initial stages of human history takes the unjust and ugly form of proving the instrument of constraint and control on women exercised by men, who occupy a relatively advantageous position in the economic, political and social fields of society.

In a patriarchal society, hierarchies and polarisation in the men and women's relationship occur due to the stereotypes or the fixed viewpoints by which they seek to understand themselves as well as others. Having an upper hand and being positioned in the centre of social organisations, male allocates marginal space to the female. Human tendency to rule and control and think in terms of binary parameters of superior/inferior, culture /nature, normal/abnormal etc. attributes the less privileged characteristics to women who exist on the peripheral space of society. Stereotypes, "largely the reflection of culture" than being empirical by nature, take the form of knowledge in Foucault's terms. These are the manifestations of the prejudiced attitudes of people promoting negative evaluation of the other sex. These notions perpetuate in society through institutions such as family, education, and media and become integral part of the process of socialisation of the beings resulting in women becoming both the victims of the oppression strategy as well as the perpetrators of their own subjugation.

Society lays down the patterns of life for a woman much before she takes birth by conceiving fixed identities for her. It confines her existence through

binary divisions between the general conception of men and women defining her as feminine as opposite to the masculine, the characteristics marked in the formation of gender by society. Further, the association of negativity with the attributes which fall into the kitty of female, such as passivity, infantilism, emotionalism and irrationality as opposed to adventure, decisiveness and rationality in male, considered positive virtues, do great harm to her self-assessment and individual progress. Moreover, the private sphere assigned to woman in the patriarchal system limits her role as daughter sister, wife and mother and also facilitates the control of her body by the opposite sex.

Within women themselves, polarisation is established as a „natural“ order, through the creation of white and black images in the categories of wife or whore, ideal woman or sorceress and mother or temptress. In order to earn respect in society, it is essential for a woman to belong to the preferred category of wife or an ideal woman and be oriented towards being obedient, devoted, self-sacrificing as the mythical figures of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. It is a different matter now that we have learnt to look at the strong aspects of these characters in terms of the resistance posed by them to their domination - thanks to the radical thinkers who have pulled us out of the stereotyped nature of our perspectives and led us to the free and neutral evaluation of the social reality around us.

Indian Fiction in English traces its origin with the advent of English education and English language in the pre independence era. It is firmly rooted in Indian cultural background and specifics which make it essentially different from English literature per se. In the post-colonial period with the rise of feminist consciousness in Indian society, there came a flurry of writers who concerned themselves with the issues relating to women quite passionately. Yet the undercurrent of such themes and concerns were nevertheless present in the works of writers who began writing before independence such as R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and later Kamala Markandya and Anita Desai before culminating in the more obvious and even polemical writings as by Shashi Deshpande, Nyantara Sehgal and Bharati Mukherjee to name a few.

Woman as a subject with her own sets of emotions and desires at the conscious as well as the unconscious level still remained less talked till the handling of such issues by Anita Desai. In the same year as the publication of the already discussed novels in 1963, appeared **Cry the Peacock** that brought out, with great sympathy and empathy, the hitherto unexplored space of female psyche- her anger, maladjustments and psychotic disorder which earlier psychologists like Sigmund Freud had attributed to the biological determinism of women.

The exploration of the dark and unknown recesses of the female self was a major breakthrough in the recognition of her subjectivity and individuality subverting the societal expectations and stereotypes established on her status of „otherness“. In another novel titled **Fire on the Mountain** (1975) by Anita Desai which won her the Sahitya Academy Award, the author takes a peek into the psyche of her protagonist Nanda Kaul whose muteness at the face of her adulteress husband and the burden of looking after the great household teaming with children and grandchildren, finally goad her to search her own values away from the societal obligations as a wife, mother and a grandmother at the family house, Carginano, at Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh.

Long preserved notions of mother- daughter closeness, glorification of woman's power of tolerance and her silence over private issues got dissipated in the fictional works which followed. Shashi Deshpande in her novel titled **The Dark Holds No Terror** makes her female protagonist Saru, a doctor by profession, share her mental agony for the sadistic sexual behaviour of her husband, with her father as she comes to meet him after the death of her mother. Unlike the conventionally held image of the mother – daughter closeness, Saru's mother had never loved her daughter and had never forgiven her for the childhood incident regarding the drowning of her younger brother in the village pond on the day she accompanied him. Saru comes back home to negotiate with the guilt, fear and emotional turmoil she has been undergoing as a daughter and the wife of a person called Manu, whose unexpected brutish behaviour during the nights that seems to be the projection of his insecurity as a male at the better social and professional placing of his wife, has left her confounded and traumatic. Saru's physical distance from her husband and sharing her grief with her father at her parental home ease down her mental and emotional anxiety, cleanse her vision and help her emerge stronger and more confident to face life back home.

Shashi Deshpande takes up this theme in her novel **Roots and Shadows** where Indu, as she comes to her share her claim over the family house after the death of her great aunt Akka, ponders over the futility of her married life with Jayant that has crushed her individuality. It is at this point that she learns to claim right over her body and her desires as she enters into a relationship with Naren, a distant relation. Even in the novel, **That Long Silence**, the questioning of the limiting effect on marriage on women is dealt with through the character of Jaya. The issue of rape within marriage shattering the old belief of the happy and peaceful marital existence of our older generation crops up in the novel **The Binding Vine** where Urmi, the female protagonist comes across the

letters of her dead mother -in -law only to reveal the dreadful and repressive nature of her marriage.

Women characters are depicted as shattering their fixed cultural and gender identities while stepping into the postmodern diasporic world of fluid selves where they learn to cope with different cultures. Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonist Jasmine in the novel by the same name is a Panjabi girl who crosses all barriers-socio, cultural, religious and economic to assimilate with the foreign world and in the process of "rebirth" or the discovery of herself.

## LITERARY FEMINISM IN INDIA

Indian literature of the twentieth century is a memorable record of the triumph and tragedy of Indian people involved in the most significant engagement in their history, the struggle for independence and the challenges that followed the achievement of that goal (Kumar das, 1991). Feminism throws a challenge to the age-long tradition of gender differentiation. It attempts to explore and find a new social order, to find pertinent resolves to the real life problems in the light of traditionally-gendered role-playing. Woman has always been projected as a secondary and inferior human being. Feminism is perhaps the most powerful movement that swept the literary world in the recent decades. It has been articulated differently in different parts of the world by various writers depending upon their class, background and level of consciousness. As a critical tool, feminism aims at providing an altogether new awareness of women's role in the modern complex world. Famous feminists in India such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, wrote significant novels in this field. Here we explain briefly Ms Deshpande's novel and her perspective. One of the important novels by Shashi Deshpande is *The Dark Holds No Tenors*. This novel has been translated into the German and Russian languages. She very well portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women, who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. They are equally aware of the social and cultural inequalities to which they are subjected to. and hence they want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but ultimately they find themselves against the well-entrenched social inertia. Sarita, in this novel very boldly confronts reality and realizes that the dark no longer holds any tenor to her. Sarita, usually known and recognized Sam is an ordinary, simple, modest and sensitive middle class woman aware of her own limitation, but lacks self-confidence. She wished and hoped and always longed to break away from the rigid traditional norms. She yearns for a new environment where, the mother cannot thrust her will on her daughter. The unhealthy experience at her parental home leads her to discover the hidden reserved strength in human being, which at times leaps up to help the individual by shaping life into a pleasurable and a possible one.

Her second novel is *Roots and Shadows* where Shashi Deshpande studies the issues and problems of the contemporary middle class women. She pictures modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women, who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. This novel won the Thirumathi Rangam prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. The entire world presented in the novel is a well-knit closed world of a joint family. Indu, the protagonist, is caught up in a conflict between their family and professional roles, between individual aspiration and social demands. Caste system and patriarchy are the two major factors responsible for this narrow-mindedness. In her third novel *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood treading the labyrinthine paths of human mind with a rare gift for sharp psychological insights into the subtleties of the human female, supported with rich evocative, unassuming and pretentious style.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study shows feminism is a struggle for equality of women, an effort to make women become like men. The agonistic definition of feminism sees it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist aggression. This study reveals the growth of Indian Feminism and its development. Indian women writers have placed the problems of Indian women in general and they have proved their place in the international literature.

Much of the early reforms for Indian women were conducted by men. However, by the late nineteenth century they were joined in their efforts by their wives, sisters, relatives and other individuals directly affected by campaigns such as those carried out for women's education. By the late twentieth century women obtained greater autonomy through independent women's organisations. Women's participation in the struggle for freedom developed their critical awareness of their role and rights in independent India.

Literature, as a part of culture, revises and rewrites values in consonance with the changing times of society. Unfortunately, despite all the benefits of constitutional rights in our country and scientific and ideological advancement at global and national levels, women still, in large number, occupy peripheral space in the socio cultural and political arena. The problem lies in the fixed mind set fuelled by the desire to control and age old beliefs and biases tearing the social fabric of our culture. Fiction, which is the most read and popular of all genres and Indian Fiction in English specifically for the growing love and usage of English, by shattering the stereotypes around women lend a great service in providing space for the real women to grow and utilize their full potentiality.

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